



Photo by PH3 Paula Sato

RP2 Jennifer Harmon covers the rear flank while on patrol during Chaplain and Religious Program Expeditionary Skills Training (CREST). CREST is a seven-week intensive tactical ministry training program for Chaplain and Religious Program Specialists (RP) that simulates actual mobilization in support of United States Fleet Marine Force combat operations.

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**C**AMP LEJEUNE, N.C. – Chaplain and Religious Program Specialist Expeditionary Skills Training (CREST) is an intense seven-week training course that provides operational readiness and mission capability for Religious Ministry Team (RMT) personnel each year.

The RMT is comprised of an active or Reserve chaplain and an enlisted religious program specialist (RP). Simply put, this program prepares RMT personnel how to better serve the needs of their unit, under any condition, in the Fleet Marine Environment.

Chaplains do not bare arms and are specifically classified as non-combatants. While in the field during combat operations, chaplains may be exposed to enemy fire. In such events, chaplains must be protected by a combatant or a person that can bare arms. That person is a Navy RP.

CREST has been in place since January 1997 and was created from lessons learned by those who served in the RMTs during Operation Desert Storm. In that conflict it was evident the RMT would greatly benefit from a formal school environment that would better prepare the team for duty with the Marine Corps.

“RPs could spend more than half of their careers with the Marines and it is crucial our students, once they leave CREST, understand the difference in mentalities,” said Chaplain (CDR) John Franklin, who serves as director of CREST. “The Marines have a different mentality summarized by the slogan ‘steel on target’ that most Navy personnel aren’t used to.”

The role of an RP in the battlefield is an important lesson in the CREST program.

“The RP is in charge on the battlefield and the chaplain must listen to his RP,” said RPC (SW/AW/FMF) Jonathan Vogal,

assistant director of CREST. “It’s the RP’s job to protect his chaplain no matter what.”

Navy Reserves and active duty train side by side at CREST and that presents both challenges and benefits.

“In this school, Reservists are usually a little older than their active duty counterpart and there is a very strenuous physical aspect throughout the program,” Vogal said. “What Reservists lose in a step, they gain in motivation and drive. They catch up quickly and do fine through the program and when activated.”

Currently, the program is comprised of five blocks of training. About half is spent in the classroom, while the other half in various physical or specialized battlefield exercises. The first two weeks are heavy on Marine indoctrination focused on the many aspects of the Marine Corps uniform, rank and structure. Participants endure various phases of physical qualification, which includes conditioning hikes, combat water survival, a Marine fitness qualification and martial arts training. Successful completion of the course awards the students a brown belt. RPs must also become familiar with handling and maintaining a weapon while preparing to qualify on the rifle range. Students are also sent through a series of specialized segments focused on the combat environment and training that is integral to field operations.

All of the training culminates in a five-day field test. Chaplain and RPs conduct exercises to simulate mass casualties, field worship, patrolling, navigation and moving to and from the battalion aid station. A good portion of that training is spent on how to cover and protect the chaplain during an ambush. It is at this point a bond is formed and both members of this close two-man team begin to understand what is at stake. This arduous training could very well save their lives one-day. The objective is to assure the ministry team can

# CREST program

*trains, integrates chaplains and RP*



Photo by PH3 Paula Sato

Navy Reservist Chaplain LT Terry Eddinger pulls on his gas mask for a simulated gas attack during Chaplain and Religious Program Expeditionary Skills Training (CREST).





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provide its services during any condition. Once complete, students graduate and are then sent to their units.

This year there are six classes scheduled, including one specifically for Reservists. Last year about 160 students went through the training; roughly 10 percent were Reserve Chaplains and RPs.

“I’ve been deployed twice already and feel a little more safe out there with the exposure I’ve had in this program,” said Chaplain (LT) Terry Eddinger, a Navy Reservist who is going through the current CREST class. “The simulated battle scenarios have taught me a great deal and have increased the camaraderie between me and the religious program specialist.”

Eddinger may be deployed to Iraq by year’s end.

“I feel more comfortable now in my role as a chaplain in the RMT and will apply what I’ve learned here, if I’m deployed again,” Eddinger said.

One course is established for chaplains and another for RPs. A special 21-day class has been established for Reservists, for those who prefer the shorter version instead of the full seven-week course. The chaplains’ four-week course overlaps a portion of the seven-week period. Through each course the emphasis is on the RPs’ training.

One graduate of the CREST course called upon his training in a skirmish just north of An Nasiriya, Iraq, in March 2003. RP1(FMF) Robert Page and his chaplain were ambushed and fired upon for a number of hours.

“I did what I was taught to do at CREST,” Page said. “I dug a hole to protect the chaplain, then moved to a safer location and returned fire.”

Page served on active duty as a Marine prior to joining the Naval Reserves.

“As a Marine you’re trained to engage or return fire immediately. The CREST program taught me to protect the ministry or chaplain first,” he said. “The chaplain is in charge of the spiritual welfare of the unit and that’s very important for morale. We’re there to make sure he delivers.”

For his efforts in Iraq, Page was honored with a Bronze Star.

Training together, active and Reserve chaplains and RPs are proving to be a well-integrated and well-trained religious ministry team. They are able to provide support to the fleet Marine environment and address unit morale and the spiritual well being of those serving on the front lines while being fully prepared for any contingency. ♦



RP2 Jennifer Harmon provides cover for a Corpsman while extracting a simulated injured soldier during Chaplain and Religious Program Expeditionary Skills Training (CREST). Group Pacific